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Book Review by Marcelo Vieta

Living Economics: Canadian Perspectives on the Social Economy, Co-operatives, and Community Economic Development. *Edited by J. J. McMurtry.* Toronto, ON: Edmond Montgomery Publications, 2010. 279 pp. ISBN 781552392829.

The Canadian social economy is thriving. From thousands of co-operatives to hundreds of community economic development projects and from myriad non-profits to a burgeoning number of social enterprise initiatives, Canada's social economy encompasses a wide array of alternative economic practices serving most communities in all regions of the country. But, despite a multi-billion-dollar force within the Canadian economy, the social economy is highly contested among academics, policymakers, and even practitioners, who argue about how to conceptualize it and what practices it encompasses. In fact, Canada's social economy is not yet very well understood, even by those who work within it.

As J. J. McMurtry perceptively points out in his introductory chapter to his edited book *Living Economics: Canadian Perspectives on the Social Economy, Co-operatives, and Community Economic Development*, this lack of understanding is surprising, given the global surge in social economic activity in response to the negative aspects of the neoliberal order of the past three or so decades. As McMurtry further emphasizes, any meaningful conceptualization of the social economy must come to terms with how social needs ground economic practices, as well as the normative (or ethical) dimensions necessarily contained therein. Conceptualizing the social economy in this way, McMurtry suggests, is important for several reasons.

Such a conceptualization assists in including the myriad diverse practices and life needs engaged within the social economy. It helps practitioners to come to know that they are indeed part of the social economy, it aids in influencing much-needed policies (especially in English Canada), and it helps in building a robust and recognizable social economy "movement." For McMurtry, by carefully considering the social economy as a guiding concept, practitioners and researchers can coalesce around "articulating [social] needs beyond the

confines of particular organizations” (p. 30) toward a “movement for ethical economic practice ... of national and international proportions” (p. 30). It is with these assertions that McMurtry frames this important book of collected essays that will no doubt contribute much to the theoretical and practical debates focusing on the social economy in Canada.

Four themes ingrained in any notion social economy worth its salt permeate the book, contributing to better understanding of the terms: *organizations*, *activities* (or practices), *values*, and the importance of *conceptualizations as guiding elements* for influencing policymaking and supporting current and future social economy practices. Taken collectively, all eight chapters of *Living Economics* agree that the social economy as an “organizing concept” should take into account *organizations* that are autonomously managed by members or community stakeholders, that are neither directly state-controlled nor strictly for-profit, and that serve the social needs of members and stakeholders via clear social objectives.

According to the book’s authors, the social economy should also be considered *a set of activities* stemming from social entrepreneurship or, better, collective projects and efforts that fulfill social needs or attempt to overcome the gaps and inequalities brought on by unjust markets, the absence or neglect of the state, or economic crises. Our global neoliberal order, the chapters in the book also suggest, is the central economic system most social economy organizations today are addressing or contesting.

Together, these activities and organizations can be seen to be overlaid by *values* of mutual aid rather than greed, solidarity rather than individualism, community needs rather than self-interest, and common ownership and democratic self-determination rather than profit goals and hierarchical control. Which of these practices, values, and organizational structures best illustrate the actual vitality and strength of the social economy for more sustainable economic ways of life in Canada is, of course, multi-perspectival as reflected in the diverse case studies and analyses focused in on in each of *Living Economics*’ eight chapters.

The book is organized thematically within four broad sections: (1) theories of the social economy, (2) Canadian histories of the social economy, (3) Canadian practices and values of the social economy in diverse regional and social settings, and (4) a practitioner’s assessment of the social economy. The first section consists of McMurtry’s strongly argued introductory chapter, which serves as the theoretical framework for the rest of the book and is itself a landmark contribution to understanding the sociological and

economic theories that undergird the notion of a social economy. Engaging with both classical and contemporary economic, sociological, and social economy theorists, McMurtry's piece should become a central text for social economy researchers and curriculum planners in economics, sociology, and co-operative studies courses.

The other seven chapters of the book tackle the question of what the social economy in Canada is by focusing on key issues of the Canadian experience: the co-operative roots of the social economy in English Canada (Ian McPherson); the social economy in Québec and its historical role in Québécois national-identity formation (Yves Vaillancourt); the role for community economic development of grounding social enterprises within the strength of "place" rather than the weaknesses of a depleted region's "social needs" (Doug Lionais and Havey Johnstone); a case study that looks at combining the skills and learning needs of students with the organizational needs of community organizations (Jorge Sousa); accounting for the social value of social economy enterprises for sustainability in the "expanded value added statement" (Laurie Mook and Jennifer Sumner); conceptualizing the social economy from the perspective of Canada's First Nations (Wanda Wuttunee); and the tensions and challenges of attempting to build a social economy movement in Ontario (Denyse Guy and Jen Heneberry). Taken collectively, these seven chapters offer compelling presentations of the diverse histories, practices, values, and cultural and regional nuances of the Canadian social economy today. More than adequately, they serve to contextualize the normative grounding of the social aspects of the economic practices McMurtry sets up in his introductory chapter.

University and college teachers and students in social science or management programs in particular will find this book extremely useful. I received very positive feedback about it from my students in a first-year introductory course on the social economy I co-taught recently using *Living Economics* as a principal textbook. Facilitating study, the chapters are clearly laid out with useful subheadings, while theme-based or secondary case study "boxes" serve to further illustrate or contextualize each chapter's main topic. My students particularly welcomed the "Glossary" and "Suggested Further Readings" sections at the end of each chapter. The book is also a solid guiding text for researchers and policymakers desiring to ground themselves in the key current debates on the social economy today. Bibliographic references presented on a chapter-by-chapter basis should also prove helpful for researchers wanting to follow up on key discussions or conduct literature reviews.

The book, however, fell short by at least two chapters that would have further illuminated the “Canadian perspective.” For example, an additional stand-alone chapter specifically positioning the Canadian social economy within global, international, or transnational perspectives would have been most useful. After all, as the book implicitly suggests, understanding the social economy depends both on the particular theoretical perspective from which one views it and on the regional or national conjuncture one decides to locate it in. Analyzing how other social economies in other national contexts and within the broader global economic order commingle with Canada’s social economy is vital, especially given the increased integration of the global economy in recent decades. A complementary book that would remedy this oversight if read alongside *Living Economics* is Darryl Reed and J. J. McMurtry’s edited book *Co-operatives in a Global Economy: The Challenges of Co-operation Across Borders*, published just a few months before *Living Economics*.

A discussion focusing on some aspect of the myriad traditional social economic activities that were present in Canada before the capitalist system took root is another chapter I would have appreciated. Such a chapter could have analyzed in some detail, for example, key moments within First Peoples’ economic practices (i.e., the potlatch, pow-wows, communal hunts, family-based production and farming, etc.); the collective economic activities of settler communities from Europe; or early labour associations like mutual societies, “red halls,” or the workers’ co-operative initiatives of the Knights of Labour. While Wuttunee’s, McPherson’s, and Vaillancourt’s chapters did touch on some of these pre-capitalist and early-capitalist Canadian economic traditions, their importance for the history of the social economy and their continued significance in Canadian society would have been worthy of some focused analysis in a text espousing a “Canadian perspective.”

Despite these minimal shortcomings, *Living Economics* has much to commend it. It goes a long way toward—finally—beginning to map out the multi-hued and multicultural dimensions of the social economy in Canada. Taken together, the collected essays move well beyond unidimensional understandings of the social economy based on, as McPherson points out in his chapter, simply enumerating how many non-profit, co-operative, or volunteer organizations exist or what the organizational taxonomy of Canada’s social economy is. Although these considerations are also important for coming to know the real strength of the social economy, all of the book’s authors make clear in their own way that more fully understanding the oft-neglected *values* and *contextualized practices* of the social economy is perhaps more important for encouraging and further proliferating alternative economic projects geared toward true social change.

Reference

Reed, Darryl, & McMurtry, J. J. (Eds.). *Co-operatives in a global economy: The challenges of co-operation across borders*. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009.

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